Emotional and cognitive correlates of hating among adolescents: An exploratory study

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A B S T R A C T

Introduction: The phenomenon of hate is becoming common among adolescents, but is little investigated by literature. Typically the haters leave their insults on the victim's social pages to denigrate another person, famous or not. In the literature, to date, there are no scientific studies that have explored psychological variables linked to these behaviors. The aim of this study was to evaluate the psychological correlates of pathological worry and cognitive distortions (CD) related to hating behaviors.
Methods: Participants (202 female and 200 male, mean age 14.9) of this study completed the *Hating Adolescents Test* (HAT), the *Penn State Worry Questionnaire* (PSWQ), and the *How I Think Questionnaire* (HITQ).
Results: Preliminary results show significant gender differences in the variables of the study: on hating and CD "minimizing," males reported higher scores than females, and females scored higher than males on pathological worry. The mediation model suggests that the CD "assuming the worst" is a mediator in the relationships between pathological worry and hating behaviors.
Conclusions: The study suggests how the tendency towards pathological worry influences hatred among adolescents, but a relevant component is represented by the tendency to distort information and to consider ambiguous situations as hostile. The implications of these findings for future theoretical and empirical research in this field are discussed.

1. Introduction

"Hating" is a phenomenon of verbal aggression that is becoming very common among adolescents, thanks in part to the usability of social media. The haters who commit this deviant act target a person (often without a reason) and insult him/her with very strong and offensive phrases and epithets. Usually the haters leave "poisonous" phrases on the victim's social pages (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter), with a need not so much to affirm their position of superiority, but rather to massacre or denigrate that of the other. Adolescents continually connected on social networks may sometimes lose the boundary between what is real and what is virtual (Morelli, Bianchi, Chirumbolo, & Baiocco, 2018; Palfrey & Urs, 2013). This loss of boundaries, especially for younger people, can result in online hatred appearing in the real world (Morelli, Bianchi, Baiocco, Pezzuti, & Chirumbolo, 2016). The social-network is often the privileged scenario where forms of racism, xenophobia and hating among adolescents are unleashed (Blaya, 2018).

However, adolescents are often unaware of the consequences their actions have for victims. They often do not even understand the risks of offending someone publicly on social media. Some authors have tried to explore the psychological variables linked to these behaviors. As Pepler (2018) has suggested, sometimes adolescents show an inability to modulate their opinions because they

allow themselves to be overwhelmed by emotional states that often destabilize them. A recent work also underlined the lack of targeted prevention interventions of cyberhate for aggressors (Blaya, 2018). According to some research, the inability to manage emotions and the preoccupation associated with this inability, especially in a period of profound changes and important developmental tasks, can be the basis of verbal aggression, antisocial behaviors or social withdraw in adolescence (Blain-Arcaro & Vaillancourt, 2016). Particularly, according to psychological literature (Macatee, Capron, Guthrie, Schmidt, & Cougle, 2015), pathological worry is one of the factors that can induce emotional and social-relational problems in adolescence: young people manifest pathological worry episodes in order to face problems or to reflect on what happens to them (Di Maggio, Zappulla, Pace, & Izard, 2017; Ruscio et al., 2015). Pathological worry, especially in adolescence, is often connected to the onset of depression and anxiety (Di Maggio, Zappulla, & Pace, 2016; Handley, Egan, Kane, & Rees, 2014), and is also related to problems of an interpersonal nature (Lyubomirsky & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1995). Some studies have explored the potential pathways that could link pathological worry to the expression of aggression (Brosschot & Thayer, 2004; Lievaart, Huijding, van der Veen, Hovens, & Franken, 2017; Zappulla, Pace, Cascio, Guzzo, & Huebner, 2014) demonstrating how pathological worry could be linked to cognitive distortions of thought related to drastic thoughts (Passanisi & Pace, 2017; Putwain, Connors, & Symes, 2010). In this sense, according to authors, pathological worry may be a predisposing factor linked to cognitive distortions, which lead the individual to give the worst possible interpretation of a given situation. In some environments, such as online, the underlying expression of aggression may be extremely common in the social life of adolescents. The online hating, in this sense, is even easier to carry out, because the instigator of verbal violence or aggression does not come into direct contact with their victim.

How the literature underlined, cognitive distortions (CD) are often associated with forms of aggression (e.g., verbal and physical) and forms of online aggression (Petruccelli et al., 2017; Pornari & Wood, 2010). CD are also implemented to a greater extent in people who have committed episodes of aggression, violence or crimes (e.g., D'Urso, Petruccelli, & Pace, 2018a, 2018b). In this sense, CD may be considered as predisposing factors related to the use of inappropriate behavior in social media, because sometimes they help the adolescent to distance himself from his victim.

From the review of existing academic literature carried out in the main international databases (e.g., Ebsco, Psycinfo, Google Scholar), only some theoretical studies have emerged, and there are no empirical and specific studies on haters, online and offline hate, and related psychological factors.

Starting with the results of numerous studies that have established an association between pathological worry and an adolescent's tendency to act out verbal aggression (Lievaart et al., 2017), we sought to explore the relationships between pathological worry, cognitive distortions, and hating in order to verify whether cognitive distortions might intervene in the relationship between pathological worry and hating. In particular, the present study was proposed to test a model of mediation that explored the total direct and indirect effects of pathological worry on online and offline hating among a sample of Italian adolescents. We expected that cognitive distortions would be positively associated with hating after controlling for pathological worry. Finally, estimating the indirect effect of pathological worry on hating through cognitive distortions, we tested the hypothesis that cognitive distortions would be an intervening variable between pathological worry and the tendency to hate.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedure

A group of 402 Caucasian adolescent participants (202 female and 200 male), with a mean age of 14.90 (SD = 0.54) volunteered for this study. All participants attending the third classes of high school. A written informed consent was obtained for all by sending letters to their parents in order to inform them of the study. No parents objected to their child's involvement in the study. We also obtained assent from all the adolescents involved in the study. All participants were allowed to leave the study at any time. The participants completed the questionnaires at the same time, during normal teaching activities, with the consent of the head teacher. Data were collected during the 2017. All procedures were performed in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

2.2. Measures

Demographics questionnaire. A brief demographic survey was administered, obtaining information on age, gender, area of residence, sexual orientation, educational level, employment status and ethnicity.

Hating Adolescents test (HAT; Pace, D'Urso, Cacioppo, Passanisi & Caretti, in press) questionnaire for evaluated the phenomenon of haters. The questionnaire consists of 12 items: 6 refer to online hate (items 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, e.g., "Would you use, on social media, a phrase like: You're so ugly that when you were born, your mom sent the apology cards to everyone") and the remaining 6 are related to off-line hate (in attendance) (items 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, e.g., "Would you use, in the presence, a phrase like: So disgust that when you look in the mirror he turns the other way"?). The phrases used to create items have been extrapolated from blogs and social networks really frequented by adolescents and they refers to three different areas: physical aspect, intellectual abilities and general unworthiness. Participants were asked to answer on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly in agreement). Cronbach's alpha coefficient (alpha = .91) suggests excellent scale reliability. Furthermore, the correlation between items ranges from 0.89 to 0.91. The exploratory factorial analysis (EFA) highlighted a single-factor structure (eigenvalue > 1; 5.930), which explains 50% of the variance. The factorial structure does not underline the existence of a different tendency to practice hating